

ABSTRACT

WHAT INFLUENCES UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS  
TO CHOOSE SOCIAL WORK

By

Brandi Elaine Williams

May 2007

The purpose of the study was to describe self-reported influences on undergraduate students to choose social work as a major—including the social work populations and activities of interest to social work students. Fifty junior undergraduate students from California State University, Long Beach, participated in the study. A self-administered questionnaire was used to measure their self-reported influences and career aspirations.

The study found that helping and working with people in some form and previous work/volunteer experience were the most popular factors of influence for students choosing social work as a major. Social work activities involving children, adolescents, and 100families were the most frequently reported influence. Most influential populations were children/adolescents, the poor, and multicultural populations.

The study's implication study was that an understanding of students' interests should help with the development of effective recruitment techniques for social work schools and with alleviating the shortage of professional social workers.

WHAT INFLUENCES UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS  
TO CHOOSE SOCIAL WORK

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Master of Social Work

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WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE,

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## CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
TABLES.....	vi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Social Problem. ....	1
Purpose of the Study.....	1
Definition of Terms. ....	2
Career Aspirations. ....	2
Influence.....	2
Values.....	2
2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE. ....	3
Demographics and Prevalence of Social Work Students.....	3
Shortage of Social Workers. ....	5
Social Work Students' Influences. ....	11
Career Aspirations of Social Work Students. ....	14
Conclusion.....	19
3. METHODOLOGY.....	21
Design. ....	21
Sample Selection. ....	21
Instrument. ....	21
Data Collection. ....	22
Data Analysis.....	23

CHAPTER	Page
4. RESULTS.....	24
Demographics and Descriptive Characteristics. ....	24
Attitudes Regarding the Field of Social Work. ....	26
Level of Influence of Factors, Populations, and Activities on Career Options. ....	26
5. DISCUSSION.....	30
Findings. ....	30
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research. ....	33
Implications for Social Work Practice. ....	34
APPENDICES.....	35
A. INFORMED CONSENT.....	36
B. QUESTIONNAIRE.....	40
REFERENCES CITED. ....	45

## TABLES

TABLE	Page
1. Demographic and Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents.....	25
2. Attitudes Regarding the Field of Social Work, by Themes.....	27
3. Professional Activities and Career Goals. ....	28
4. Social Work Populations: Children/Adolescents.....	29

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Social Problem

Social work practice requires a high level of skill and training. It is the largest and the most diverse health profession in the United States (State University of New York [SUNY]-Albany and National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2006). Social workers help in many areas of a person's life including family, work, and mental health. Due to a severe shortage in qualified social workers in Los Angeles, less educated, nonsocial workers are being used to meet the need (Pasztor, Saint-Germain, & DeCrescenzo, 2002). Undergraduate social work students represent a potential pool for future social workers. Undergraduate classes may be a student's first exposure to social work and its values. An understanding of the self-reported influences of undergraduate students' interest in social work can be helpful with recruiting efforts to fill the needed gap.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the self-reported influences of undergraduate students to chose social work as a major and as their career aspirations. The researcher attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What social work activities are of interest to social work students?

2. What social work populations are of interest to social work students?
3. What are the careers aspirations of interest to social work students?

### Definition of Terms

#### Career Aspirations

For the purpose of this study, defined as the goals and purpose that students expressed toward their own professional career.

#### Influence

Those factors that affect or promote students' interest to pursue social work.

#### Values

The beliefs of the social work student with respect to an emotional investment or agreed upon as a profession.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social workers are highly trained professionals who seek to help people and society (Reid & Peebles-Wilkins, 1991). They can help individuals function better in their environments, assist with family and personal difficulties, and improve their relationships with others. Social workers help people overcome some of life's most difficult challenges: poverty, abuse, inequality, addiction, unemployment, and mental illness (SUNY-Albany & NASW, 2006). Undergraduate social work students are an important group to explore. These students are a feeder group for graduate social work programs, and they also represent a significant prospect for future employment in the public and private sector.

#### Demographics and Prevalence of Social Work Students

California is a state that is ethnically and linguistically diverse (*Planning the Future*, 2001). Unlike the population of California, the field of social work is less ethnically varied. In 2004, the majority of social workers indicated themselves to be non-Hispanic White (85%; SUNY-Albany & NASW, 2006). Change in this area is occurring, but slowly. Social workers who are 30 years and younger are less likely to indicate themselves ethnically as non-Hispanic White and more likely to indicate "other." The citizens of California need social workers who mirror the diversity

around them. Another discrepancy within social work is that it is disproportionately dominated by women. In a recent survey conducted by SUNY-Albany and NASW (2006) of licensed clinical social workers, 4 out of 5 (81%) respondents identified themselves as women. The number of male social workers grew smaller in the younger age cohorts. If this trend continues, there will be fewer male social workers as older male social workers age out of the system.

Students with a bachelor's degree in social work are prepared for entry-level case or group work with clients and their families. There have been a number of estimates on the graduation rates of students by social work schools. In the University of California, Berkeley 1998 study of 13 social work programs in California, there were fewer than 5,000 social work students (as cited in California Assembly, Human Service Committee, 2002). Of that number, approximately half were in Master in Social Work (M.S.W.) programs and the other half were in Bachelor in Social Work (B.S.W.) programs. In that same year 1,509 students graduated from those social work programs. Of those students, 35% earned their B.S.W. degree. Overall, the enrollment in B.S.W. programs has steadily increased while M.S.W. enrollment has remained stable (California Assembly, Human Service Committee).

California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) has been a public institution since 1949. The undergraduate student population at CSULB has been estimated to be 28,514 ("The 2007 Edition," 2006). One program that is offered at CSULB for undergraduate students is social work. The Department of Social Work for CSULB offers full-time and part-time models. In 2005, there were 111 undergraduate social work

students enrolled at CSULB. Of that total, 69.37% were full-time students and 30.63% were part-time students (Candance M. Smith, Admissions Coordinator, CSULB Department of Social Work, personal communication, July 2006). Undergraduate social work programs are a valuable feeder for graduate social work programs. SUNY-Albany and NASW (2006) data indicated that 63% of social workers with B.S.W. degrees in the survey subsequently received a M.S.W. degree, although later B.S.W. degree recipients have been less likely to pursue M.S.W. degrees than earlier B.S.W. degree recipients. Of the 662 applicants who applied to CSULB in the fall of 2006 for a M.S.W. degree, 29 were applicants who graduated with a B.S.W. degree from CSULB and 100 applicants had social work undergraduate degrees from other colleges (C. M. Smith, personal communication, July 2006). A B.S.W. degree provides students with a healthy understanding of human development and behavior. Social work schools have a vested interest in recruiting and producing social workers for the future.

#### Shortage of Social Workers

Social work is a large helping profession with an estimated number of 840,000 practitioners, second only to registered nurses in terms of numbers of practitioners (SUNY-Albany & NASW, Albany, 2006). Social workers are hired by public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit organizations. In California, most of the social workers are employed at the county level (Pasztor et al., 2002). California produces fewer social work graduates per capita than other large states that also have a high level of demand for social workers (California Assembly Human Service Committee, 2002). The profession of social work in today's market is facing the challenge

of securing qualified social workers. The negative view that the public has of social workers, along with the poor pay, deters many potential social workers from entering the field (Pasztor et al.). Social workers are a resource used to distribute social services. The more social services that are needed by the public, the greater the demand for social workers.

Social workers participate in a variety of fields such as mental health, child welfare, developmental disabilities, and community planning. It is unfortunate that while there are plentiful jobs available, there are not enough qualified social workers to go around (Pastor et al., 2002; SUNY-Albany & NASW, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2006), job opportunities for social workers should increase 33%, compared with only 14% for all industries combined through the year 2014.

There are several reasons for this projected need for social workers. One reason is the anticipated services that will be needed for the aging baby boomer generation. Social work is 1 of the 20 professions that will be most affected by baby boomer retirements (SUNY-Albany & NASW). Just as the U.S. population is getting older, so is the current population of social workers. A second reason for the projected need in social workers is that when the older social workers retire there will be a need for new social workers to be available to fill their positions. It has been estimated that there will be a need for 54,000 more social workers just to balance out retirements for the period of 2003-2008 (SUNY-Albany & NASW).

A third reason is that skilled social workers are necessary to help address adult children concerning their parents' increasingly complex psychosocial needs and to help

provide information and long-term care for elderly persons. Social workers are equipped to care for older adults in a wide range of settings by providing information regarding navigating health and social services as well as choices in housing and transportation (Institute for Geriatric Social Work [IGSW] & New York Academy of Medicine [NYAM], 2005). Social workers provide innumerable benefits to their clients: “Patients reported greater satisfaction with their healthcare when a social worker is involved, saying that the quality of their care improves and their level of social interaction increases” (IGSW & NYAM, p. 1).

There are many areas in social service that are experiencing a shortage. The demand for social workers will continue to increase across the board as the population grows and diversifies. An area that is experiencing a serious need of social workers is developmental disabilities. Parents of children with developmental disabilities face the challenge of finding affordable and accessible service. Regional centers in California currently serve about 170,000 clients. These centers experience a 5% annual growth in the size of the population that they serve. Regional centers have a difficulty keeping social workers. Many social workers use their time working in the regional centers as a training opportunity. State regional centers currently have a 25% vacancy rate (California Assembly, Human Service Committee, 2001). This kind of high vacancy can result in clients being assigned to staff that may not possess expertise concerning the client's needs.

Another area that is experiencing a shortage is mental health. Despite an increase in funding for mental health (California Assembly, Human Service

Committee, 2001), there is a disproportionate ratio of mentally ill individuals to mental health professionals of 4,500:1 (California Mental Health Planning Council, 2003). The statewide public mental health system has a vacancy rate reaching 22% for licensed clinical social workers (L.C.S.W.s) and M.S.W.s combined (California Assembly, Human Service Committee). A common response from social workers in this field is that they feel dispirited by the constant revolving door of clients and the need to restrain them (Reid et al., 1999). It can take weeks for some agencies to fill just one vacant position in this field.

Another area that is experiencing a shortage is child welfare. Vacancy rates in Child Protective Services in California have been about 9.5% (Pasztor et al., 2002). It has been estimated that California will need 3,400 new social workers to fill these vacancies, which are 50% more than the number they currently have (California Assembly, Human Service Committee, 2001). A factor in the increasing need for child welfare social workers is that there are better reporting and monitoring procedures that have increased the number of child abuse reports and children in the system (Pasztor et al.). More social workers are needed to respond to these reports and help prevent children and families from entering into the system in the first place. Certain laws mandate that social workers achieve specific goals in a certain time frame. A high vacancy rate in the child welfare system makes it increasingly hard for present social workers to meet those goals. In addition, the need for social workers in Adult Protective Services (APS) has drained workers from the child welfare system (California Assembly, Human Service Committee).

Another area that is experiencing a shortage is gerontology. The elderly population is growing increasingly. Aging and long term care has vacancies rates of 20% to 30%. Obstacles to the recruitment of social workers in this area are the lack of candidates willing to work for the low pay and the lack of diversity among these candidates (California Assembly, Human Service Committee, 2001). APS, a department that tackles older adults' needs, is required to operate 24 hours a day. In Los Angeles County, the APS caseload has increased significantly over the past few years (California Assembly, Human Service Committee). The role that APS provides has expanded from that of crisis intervention to crisis management. The shortage in social workers is affecting many areas, but in order to solve this problem, one must know the reasons behind it. There have been many reasons postulated for the continued shortage in social workers. Reasons that have been given include "increase in paperwork, [increase in] caseload size, severity in client problems, and level of oversight" (SUNY-Albany & NASW, 2006, p. 10). Job recruitment is hampered by high caseloads and more attractive job alternatives. SUNY-Albany and NASW reported that nearly 75% of their respondents cited a higher salary as being a major influence in changing their current job.

A reason given for the shortage in social workers is high turnover. Public agencies experience an average turnover rate of up to 20% per year (Pasztor et al., 2002). Individuals change careers and jobs constantly. When there is constant change within an agency concerning the personnel of the staff, the result is instability for both clients and staff. When the number of staff is constantly changing, cases tend to get

assigned to staff who may not have a familiarity with the client's problems. Excessive turnover rates in any agency leads to higher cost in training and hiring, an increased chance for damaging decisions, and reduced organizational effectiveness (Balfour & Neff, 1993). A possible reason for turnover is underpreparation for the job position. Balfour and Neff related that the factors most important for a person staying with an agency are experience in the field, educational attainment, and the employee's stake in the organization. Previous experience with an agency can allow people to evaluate their compatibility with the job and prepare themselves for the expected demands.

There are a number of factors involved in the high turnover rate. The factors most frequently expressed by social workers that would influence them to change their current position were a higher salary (73%), lifestyle/family concerns (52%), more interesting work (37%), and stress in their current job (35%; SUNY-Albany & NASW, 2006). The factors that influenced social workers to remain in employment have been shown to differ by gender. Male social workers are more likely than females to change jobs for more interesting work, increased mobility, location, or agency mission. Instead, female social workers are more likely than males to change jobs for lifestyle/family concerns, quality of supervision, or stress in the current job (SUNY-Albany & NASW). These are just some of the factors that administrators in agencies can take into account when trying to maintain a full and productive staff and reduce turnover.

Another reason given for the shortage in social workers is that agencies find it difficult to recruit staff with the minimum educational requirements (Pasztor et al., 2002). Social workers traditionally have been expected to have a degree in social

work, but now this is not always the case. Many agencies have now lowered the bar to meet the quota regarding staff. A negative result of this action is a lower quality of service to the public (Pasztor et al.). A byproduct of the shortage of trained social workers is the practice of employers to hire nonsocial workers to fill social work vacancies. Agencies are hiring social workers with degrees ranging from history to business (Pasztor et al.; SUNY-Albany & NASW, 2006). This practice is most often used by those working in the child welfare/family practice area (45%) and less often by those working in the medical health practice area (14%; SUNY-Albany & NASW). By understanding the factors and reasons behind the shortage in social workers, there is a better chance to rectify the current situation.

#### Social Work Students' Influences

As the nature of social work has broadened over the years, the question arises as to what influences today's student to choose a career in social work. A student may have a variety of reasons for choosing social work. It can be because of certain events in the person's life, familial conditions, or previous experiences working in the social services. Rompf and Royse's (1994) data showed that life events could have an influence on individuals to go into social work. Their study revealed that M.S.W. students, more than any other graduate students, came from families in which alcohol or drug abuse was a problem. A possible benefit to growing up in a dysfunctional family is a familiarity with the social service system and the roles of social workers. For students who come from dysfunctional families, their feelings of sensitivity and empathy for the feelings of others is likely to be enhanced (Rompf & Royse). Having the right role

model in one's life can be another influence with respect to entering a certain career. For the question, "Who was the person most influential in your choice of career?" Rompf and Royse's figures (p. 167) showed that 24% of the students indicated it was a social worker, 14% indicated a psychologist or therapist, 17% indicated a teacher, and another 15% indicated a family member.

Idealism has been identified as a factor that influences social workers in their choice in pursuing their career (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997; Wagner, 1989). Social work provides a chance for individuals to address social problems and become involved in helping to fashion a better world (Csikai & Rozensky). In their study, Csikai and Rozensky defined idealism as "thoughts and behavior that value and promote individual change" (p. 11). For idealism to exist, there must be a belief that the human condition can be changed. Idealism apparently is not always constant. Wagner studied the dedication of social workers in New York to social idealism and change. The author's conclusions were that the social worker eventually disconnected from idealism due to negative job experiences or promotion to more powerful positions. A possible implication in a loss in idealism can be low productivity. Csikai and Rozensky found that younger students and female students were more likely to score high on idealism. Beginning B.S.W. and M.S.W. students had higher levels of idealism, and those students with high levels of idealism reported choosing social work for altruistic reasons. The high rate of idealism among beginning students may be the result of a less comprehensive understanding of social work and experience in the field.

The purpose of social work education is to prepare students to work successfully with economically and culturally diverse populations and environments (Shera & Bogo, 2001). To what extent does education influence students' professional identity and values? In the United States, social work education historically has embodied values related to serving the disadvantaged (D'Aprix, Dunlap, Abel, & Edwards, 2004). Social work education occurs at two stages: the baccalaureate and the master's. There is conflicting data on the influence that education has on a student's career choices and values. Some say graduate education does have a significant influence on the student's practice interests and self-identification, especially among beginning students (Bogo, Michalski, Raphael, & Roberts, 1995). Others, such as D'Aprix et al., have suggested that the educational process has little effect on student values. Even if that is the case, education at least provides students with the exposure to the value base of the social work profession. Schwartz and Robinson's (1997) study described how the B.S.W. curriculum promoted and reinforced a favorable explanation of poverty. The extent to which favorable perceptions of the poor translate to career aspirations is unknown. There may be conflicting data on the influence of education, but if a program of study is gratifying to the student, it is likely to reinforce his/her career aspirations (Bogo et al., 1995).

The influences for M.S.W. students as opposed to B.S.W. students in going into social work relate more to enhancing future career opportunities. In Abell and McDonnell's (1995) study, the researchers asked respondents to rate the significance of factors influencing their overall decision to enter graduate school. The most

important factor listed by these students was increasing the range of available jobs; fulfilling one's family's career expectations was listed as the least influential factor. It appears from the various studies that students are influenced by variety of factors in their selection of social work.

### Career Aspirations of Social Work Students

Social work students have an opportunity to choose from a variety of social work areas. Examples of the areas in which social workers can work are clinical practice, child welfare/family services, APS, mental health, health care, the school system, criminal justice, and gerontology—to name just a few. Different studies have reported different social work areas as being more popular. Bogo, Raphael, and Roberts (1993) studied the frequency of various social work interests and activities. The authors found that 41% of respondents were interested in traditional social work practice; the area found to be of least interest was policy/research (8%). In Abell and McDonell's (1995) study, family and children services, followed by mental health, were rated by students as the most popular social work areas. A career in gerontology was not found to be particularly popular (IGSW & NYAM, 2005). There are fewer graduating social work students who are specializing in aging. In 2000, 2% of the estimated number of social workers who graduated with a master's degree selected aging as a field of practice (IGSW & NYAM). Counseling and family or marital therapy were marked by social work students as the most popular practice functions, with protective services the least popular (Butler, 1990). There are a variety of options from which social work students may choose.

Career aspirations among students are not always constant over time. Bogo et al. (1995) found that 1<sup>st</sup>-year students changed their practice interest over their time spent in school from an interest in private practice to an interest in working with disadvantaged clients. A possible reason for this shift in students' career aspirations might be a broader knowledge and experience in social work gained both in class and in the field. Men and women differ in regard to career aspirations. SUNY-Albany and NASW (2006) reported that based on their survey of social workers, women were more likely than men to plan to pursue nondegree training in social work and to increase their social work hours; men were more likely planning to retire. Career plans also differed among social workers based on their ethnic background. African American social workers were less likely than White social workers to say that they planned to remain in their current position and more likely to say that they planned to seek a new opportunity/promotion or to leave the field of social work but continue to work (SUNY-Albany & NASW). This sort of information suggests a need to develop retention strategies for minority social workers. Social work is at its best when practitioners come from a variety of backgrounds and, through that, are able to relate to their clients. From an economic standpoint, students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds were shown to be more interested in working with the poor than those from middle-class backgrounds (Perry, 2003). In the end, the kind of work that students practice will depend a great deal on the kinds of jobs that are available.

There are certain populations with whom students prefer to work. Butler (1990) found that for the students she surveyed, the most popular types of clients were

those with nonchronic problems such as marital or family difficulties. The clients who are likely to need more intensive services, such as the developmentally and physically disabled, were the least popular. The students' self-identification may play a role in what populations they are more interested in serving. The student's identification as a "social worker" versus a "therapist" has been correlated with the preferred client group and interest in private practice (Bogo et al., 1993). Those students who identified themselves as therapists were more interested in private practice with nonchronic patients.

Even though social workers prefer working with certain populations, according to the survey of SUNY-Albany and NASW (2006), a majority of social workers had at least some clients in all age groups. Female social workers saw significantly more children than their male counterparts, but then by and large there are more female social workers than there are male social workers. In general, social workers saw clients who were racially and ethnically diverse (SUNY-Albany & NASW). Social workers have the ability to work not only in a variety of settings but also with a variety of clients.

Some students' lack of interest in working with nonchronic/disadvantaged patients has caused a growing concern that social work students are not committed to the traditional social work mission and are leaving it to pursue the more lucrative option of private practice (Abell & McDonell, 1995; Bogo et al., 1995; Butler, 1990, 1992). The traditional social work mission has been defined as "helping disadvantaged populations and improving social conditions through social action" (Bogo et al., 1995,

p. 5). Butler (1990) found that students were interested in serving nondisadvantaged groups, favored using a psychotherapeutic over a person-in-environment model, and aspired to enter into private practice. For Land (1987), the concern was that “altruism and political commitment may be devolving into secondary motivation, taking a back-seat to psychotherapy for profit” (p. 75). These concerns seem to be based on the thought that social work students appear more concerned with benefitting themselves instead of others.

While some studies have found that social work students have a high interest in going into private practice, other studies have found just the opposite. In opposition to previous studies that social work students are abandoning the role of helping disadvantaged clients, there are studies that found students were committed to working with disadvantaged populations (Abell & McDonell, 1995; Bogo et al., 1995; Butler, 1990). Abell and McDonell reported that there was a low level of reported aspirations for a private practice career. In Butler’s (1990) study, there was a large number of students who simultaneously wanted to enter private practice and work with disadvantaged clients. It is unclear from the study how these students hoped to resolve such divergent career aspirations and to what extent they planned to work with disadvantaged clients and perform traditional social work activities in private practice.

For a student, does having a career aspiration to be in private practice conflict with social work values? The Council on Social Work Education’s (1995) curriculum policy for M.S.W. programs states that “the purpose of social work education is to prepare competent and effective social work professionals who are committed to

practice that includes services to the poor and oppressed” (p. 134). The desire to prepare for private practice has a negative impact on students’ desire to work with the poor (Perry, 2003). Many private practitioners will see more middle-income clients than they will poor clients.

Social work students have an option in their career to seek to become a L.C.S.W. Licensing provides quality assurance to the public based upon agreed standards (Land, 1987). The results of the study by SUNY-Albany and NASW (2006) showed that state government organizations employ about half of all licensed social workers in public agencies for all age groups. Licensed social workers have the ability to work in a variety of settings, but mental health is the largest area in which L.C.W.S.s practice. Mental health represents nearly 37 % of all licensed practitioners while child welfare/family, medical health, and aging represent just over 13%, just under 13%, and 9% of all social workers, respectively. Older social workers are more likely to work as private practitioners. This might suggest a career path pattern for social workers as they grow older and help to resolve the perceived conflict between social work students wanting to do private practice in the future and still working with disadvantaged groups.

Private practice offers an important route for professional advancement for licensed social workers. Butler’s (1992) study showed that approximately two thirds of the respondents thought they would enter into private practice at some point in their career. Butler (1992) indicated that students’ plans for private practice were influenced by their interest in treatment modalities and client groups that lent themselves more to

private practice. Private practice seems to attract students who place great importance on being their own boss, earning a good income, having flexible hours, and being free of the constraints faced by social workers in agency settings (Butler, 1992; D'Aprix et al., 2004). Private practice also appeals to those students who prefer direct clinical practice and contact with clients over other features in social work. Social workers in private practice appeared to be more satisfied with their job than social workers who worked in agencies (Butler, 1992). A possible drawback to private practice is that social workers may start to feel isolated from the network of other social workers (Butler, 1992).

With state and federal dollars decreasing and helping disadvantaged clients becoming more frustrating, private practice is becoming a more attractive alternate (SUNY-Albany & NASW, 2006). The jobs that deal with disadvantaged clients should provide the autonomy and compensation that will attract qualified and passionate social workers. If these positive conditions are not created, then there will not be the numbers and quality of social workers to work with disadvantaged populations.

### Conclusion

Choosing a career can be a long, hard process with many factors involved. A career in social work that is geared toward helping others is not for everybody. In any class there are students who are better suited for another career. The present study attempted to explore the self-reported influences of social work students with respect to entering the field of social work. The influences may range from family events (Rompf & Lewis, 1994) to idealism (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997) to education (Bogo et

al., 1995). No one factor has a dominant influence in undergraduate students' choice of social work as a career. Any combination of these three factors may play a role in a student's choice in social work. Once a student becomes a social worker, he/she has an abundance of career choices to pursue. He/She can go into private practice, work in a nonprofit agency, or work with disadvantaged populations. Questions have been raised about a possible conflict between social workers wanting to do private practice and working with disadvantaged clients (Abell & McDonell, 1995; Bogo et al., 1995). In the end, students choose the career or specialty that best fits them and they enjoy doing.

There is a shortage of social workers in many areas: child welfare, mental health, and developmental disabilities. The need is only expected to increase in the next decade (Pasztor et al., 2002). The explanations given for this shortage of social workers range from a increase in caseload and paperwork, high turnover, to the difficulty of hiring enough staff that meet the minimum educational standards. There is no definitive explanation that has been given for the shortage of social workers in California and other states. In the present study, the researcher hoped to provide a working knowledge of social work students' self-reported influences in choosing social work as a major. This information can then be of help to educators and employers in recruitment and retention strategies in the field of social work.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Design

A quantitative cross-sectional design was utilized for this study. A semistructured questionnaire was administered to all junior social work major students at CSULB during class. The questionnaire included demographic data, 7-point Likert scale response sets, yes/no answer sets, and two open-ended questions.

#### Sample Selection

A nonrandom, sample of convenience was used to draw participants for this study of junior undergraduate students majoring in social work at CSULB. In accordance with CSULB's social work model, juniors are required to take SW 221, Introduction to Social Work Practicum. There are three sections of this particular class. This researcher obtained permission from each of the professors in each section of SW 221 to administer the questionnaire to the class. Approximately 60 students were given a consent form (appendix A) and a 15-minute questionnaire (appendix B).

#### Instrument

The instrument used was a questionnaire designed by this researcher; thus, the reliability and validity of the instrument were unknown, as it had not been empirically tested. The instrument contained 19 items. Questions 1-4 involved demographic data

surrounding the respondent's sex, age, ethnicity, and family economic level. Questions 5 and 6 were yes/no answer sets that surrounded the respondent's future plans in social work. Question 7 dealt with how the respondent would like to be identified as a person in the field of social work. Questions 8 and 9 allowed the respondent the opportunity to give a short response to open-ended questions. Questions 10-19 were three sets of 7-point Likert scales used to assess the influence of (a) factors in the person's life, (b) areas of social work, (c) social work populations of choice of social work as a major, and (d) career aspirations. There were two possible response sets. For questions 10-12, the choices were *Not Influenced* (1), *Somewhat Influenced* (4), or *Strongly Influenced* (6). For questions 13-19, the choices were *Strongly Disagree* (1), *Neither Agree/Nor Disagree* (4), or *Strongly Disagree* (7).

#### Data Collection

A consent form and a self-administered questionnaire were distributed to all the junior social work students at CSULB present on the day of class. In the consent letter (appendix A), the researcher informed the respondents about the purpose of this study that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that their responses were confidential (i.e., they were instructed not to place any identifying information on the questionnaire). After the consent forms were signed and returned, this researcher distributed the questionnaires to all those who volunteered to participate. All students were given a candy bar as a token of appreciation.

### Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software was used for data analysis. Frequencies and percentages were run for each variable. A bivariate analysis was conducted to determine any correlation between the target variables.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Demographic and Descriptive Characteristics

The average age for the respondents in this study is the category 21-26 years. Ninety-two percent of the respondents were female, and 8% were male. The largest number of respondents were Hispanics ( $n = 23$ , 46%), followed by Caucasians ( $n = 13$ , 26%), Asian Americans ( $n = 9$ , 18%), African Americans ( $n = 2$ , 4%), Native American ( $n = 1$ , 2%), and other ( $n = 2$ , 4%). The respondents' perceived economic levels of their family as a child while growing up was poor ( $n = 4$ , 8%), working class ( $n = 27$ , 54%), middle class ( $n = 17$ , 34%), and upper class ( $n = 1$ , 2%). The questionnaire contained three questions regarding career aspirations. For the question of whether the respondent would work in the area of social work in the next 5 years, 94% said yes, 2% said no, and 4% said maybe. In regard to the respondents' ambition toward pursuing a higher education 84% planned to go on to get a master's degree or doctorate in social work; few had no intention of attending graduate school; and only 14% were unsure. Respondents primarily identified themselves as social workers ( $n = 80\%$ ); 12% wanted to be identified as clinicians and 4% as therapists. None of the respondents identified themselves as caseworkers. The demographic and career aspirations of the respondents are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Demographic and Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents ( $N = 50$ )

Characteristic	<i>f</i>	%
Sex		
Male	4	8.0
Female	46	92.0
Age (years)		
20 or younger	15	30.0
21-26	26	52.0
27-32	2	4.0
33 or older	7	14.0
Ethnicity		
African American/Black	2	4.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	9	18.0
Caucasian/White	13	26.0
Hispanic/Latino	23	46.0
Native American	1	2.0
Other	2	4.0
Family economic level		
Poor	4	8.0
Working class	27	54.0
Middle class	17	34.0
Upper class	1	2.0
Future in social work		
Yes	46	94.0
No	1	2.0
Maybe	2	4.0
Advanced degree		
Yes	42	84.0
No	1	2.0
Maybe	7	14.0
Social work identity		
Social worker	40	80.0
Clinician	6	12.0
Therapist	4	8.0
Case worker	0	0.0

### Attitudes Regarding the Field of Social Work

Respondents were asked two open-ended questions:

1. What do you like best in the field of social work?
2. What do you like least in the field of social work?

The major themes for the question on what respondents liked best in the field of social work were (a) helping people/working with people ( $n = 33, 54\%$ ), (b) helping communities ( $n = 8, 13\%$ ), (c) making a difference ( $n = 10, 16\%$ ), (d) diversity in field opportunities ( $n = 9, 15\%$ ), and e) other ( $n = 1, 2\%$ ); 1 person did not respond to this question. Respondents were also asked what they liked least in the field of social work. The responses followed six trends: (a) a lack of resources and funding ( $n = 17, 35\%$ ), (b) emotionally draining nature of the work ( $n = 15, 31\%$ ), (c) the amount of work ( $n = 5, 10\%$ ), (d) the category of “other” ( $n = 5, 10\%$ ), (e) a negative public view of social work and its clients ( $n = 4, 8\%$ ), or (f) no dislikes ( $n = 3, 6\%$ ); 4 respondents did not answer this question. The respondents’ attitudes regarding what they liked the best and the least in social work are presented in Table 2.

### Level of Influence of Factors, Populations, and Activities on Career Options

A correlation was found for all three factors of influence and a career doing counseling or therapy. A significant correlation was found for children and families and child welfare activity and a career in child welfare. A significant correlation was found for child welfare and family service activity with community planning. A significant correlation was found for family service activity with a private practice career.

TABLE 2. Attitudes Regarding the Field of Social Work, by Themes ( $N = 50$ )

Question	<i>f</i>	%
What do you like most about the field of social work?		
Helping/working with people	33	54.0
Making a difference	10	16.0
Diversity in field opportunities	9	15.0
Helping communities	8	13.0
Other	1	2.0
What do you like least about the field of social work?		
Lack of funding/resources	17	35.0
Emotionally draining	15	31.0
Amount of work	5	10.0
No dislike	5	10.0
Negative view of social work and its clients	4	8.0
Other	3	6.0

*Note.* One respondent did not answer this question.

A significant correlation was found for all three factors with a career running an agency. Table 3 indicates that significant correlations were found among professional activities and career goals.

A correlation was performed on questions 10-12. These three questions examined the factors of influence, professional activities of influence, and populations of influence of the respondents. The three most frequent items selected by the respondents from each question were correlated with questions 13-19, which measured the respondents' opinion of certain jobs in social work, such as doing private practice, teaching, or child welfare. The most popular factors of influence, as labeled by the

TABLE 3. Professional Activities and Career Goals ( $N = 50$ )

Activity	Therapy	Child Welfare	Community Planning	Private Practice	Agency
Children and families					
Pearson $r$	.408	-.279	-----	-----	.375
Significance	.003	.050	-----	-----	.007
Child welfare <sup>a</sup>					
Pearson $r$	.413	-.415	.364	-----	.441
Significance	.003	.003	.010	-----	.001
Family service					
Pearson $r$	.574	-----	.302	.366	.331
Significance	.000	-----	.033	.009	.019

<sup>a</sup> $n = 49$ .

respondents, were helping people (mean = 6.76), working with people (mean = 6.30), and previous work and volunteer experience (mean = 5.67). No significant correlation was found among the three factors of influence and questions 13-19. The most frequent professional activities, as labeled by the respondents, were children and families (mean = 5.96), family service (mean = 5.84), and child welfare (mean = 5.65).

The most popular social work populations for the respondents were population (mean = 6.20), poor population (mean = 5.65), and multicultural population (mean = 6.20). A significant correlation was found between the influence of children/adolescent population with a career in counseling or therapy, a career in child welfare, and a career running an agency. These correlations are seen in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Social Work Populations: Children/Adolescents ( $N = 50$ )

Children/Adolescent Population	Therapy	Child Welfare	Agency
Pearson $r$	.486	-.337	.442
Significance	.000	.017	.001

The perceived economic level of the respondent's family was crosstabulated with how the respondent would like to be identified as a person in the field of social work, with no significant value indicated. The perceived economic level of the respondent's family was crosstabulated with the respondent's desire to earn an advanced degree, again with no significant value indicated. No significant correlation was found between how a person in the field of social work wanted to be identified and the influence of certain populations or professional activities. There was no significant correlation found between how a person in the field of social work would like to be identified and the desire to go into private practice.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to describe the self-reported influences of undergraduate students to choose social work as a major and their career aspirations. This chapter addresses the summary of findings, limitations, implications for social work practice, and implications for further research.

#### Findings

There were 46 female and 4 male junior undergraduate majors in social work students who participated in this study. The majority of respondents were Hispanic/Latino. The students were in their 20s to 30s. The majority of students came from families whom they perceived as being working class or middle class. Very few respondents selected their families as coming from the poor or upper class. In regard to whether the respondents saw themselves working in the field of social work in 5 years, the majority said yes, they saw that for themselves. The majority of students expected to go on to get a master's or doctoral degree in social work in the near future. The majority of respondents preferred to be identified as a social worker or as a person in the field of social work. No one preferred to be identified as a caseworker. The negative implications of a caseworker may have been the reason for the no one choosing the label of caseworker.

Two open-ended questions were asked of the respondents:

1. What do you like the best about the field of social work?
2. What do you like the least about the field of social work?

This researcher extracted the major themes that ran through their responses. For the question of what respondents liked best about the field of social work, there were five major themes. The majority of students (54%) selected helping/working with people, including clients and people with similar goals of helping people as a reason for going to the field of social work. This was followed by the theme of working in the communities, which included being direct involved and providing resources. Another theme was making a difference that included the ability to empower and change clients' lives. Another theme was diversity in the field of social work that included a flexibility and versatility of choices in social work jobs. The last theme was "other," where 1 respondent who talked about what she liked about the CSULB school curriculum.

The second open-ended question on what respondents liked least about the field of social work had six major themes. The majority of students (35%) selected a lack of funding/resources, which includes low wages for social workers and budget cuts, as being a factor they liked least about the field of social work. Following next was the theme of the emotionally draining nature of the work, which includes stress, the negative effect that some decisions can have on the client, and maintaining boundaries between work and home. Another theme was the amount of work involved in social work, which includes the amount of paperwork, the high caseload, and the "red tape" involved in doing things. Another theme was the negative public view of social

work and its clients. Three respondents said they had nothing they disliked about the field of social work. The category of “other” included a variety of responses, ranging from more social work education and practitioners to the “history of social work.”

The three most popular factors of influence in the respondents’ choice of social work were (a) helping people, (b) working with people in some form and (c) previous work/ volunteer experience. The three most popular professional activities that influenced the respondents’ choice of social work all involved children or families in some way. The three most popular populations that influenced the respondents’ choice of social work in order were (a) the children/adolescent population, (b) the poor population, and (c) a multicultural population. These findings contrasted with the literature, which indicated that social work students were leaving the traditional clients of social work, the poor and disadvantaged, and shifting their focus to more middle-class voluntary clients (Abell & McDonell, 1995; Bogo et al., 1995). An interesting correlation was found between all three factors of influence and a career doing counseling or therapy or running an agency. A correlation was also found between those who had been influenced by the children/adolescent population and a career in counseling or therapy, child welfare, or running an agency.

Previous literature (Bogo et al., 1993) indicated a correlation between how a social worker would like to be identified and his/her desire for a career in private practice. In this study there was no significant correlation between professional identity and a career in private practice. There was no significant difference found between the respondent’s perceived family socioeconomic status and the way he/she would like to

be identified as a person in the field of social work. Previous literature (Bogo et al., 1993) identified a correlation between professional identity and a desire to work with certain social work populations (i.e., nonchronic patients or in certain social work activities, child welfare). In this study no significant differences were found between how a person in the field of social work would like to be identified and certain social work populations and activities.

#### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There were several limitations to this study. The instrument used to collect data had not been empirically tested for external and internal validity. There is also a risk of researcher bias in the questionnaire administered, because there is currently no standardized method of testing in this area of study and the questionnaire was created by the researcher specifically for the purpose of this study.

Another limitation of this study was that it only sampled undergraduate junior social work students who were attending CSULB. Therefore, no information was obtained regarding undergraduate social work students at other schools in the state of California or nationwide in regard to the factors, professional activities, and social work populations that influenced them to go into social work. The response rate had the potential to have provided a biased sample on the topic.

In the future, for a more accurate picture of the influences of undergraduate social work students, a study should be conducted with a large and more representative sample. A study could be done by creating an empirical questionnaire that could be used to measure the kinds influences that play a role in students going into social work.

Further research can be done to see if there are any differences in the influences of undergraduate students versus graduate students.

### Implications for Social Work Practice

This study sought to provide a better understanding of the influences in directing an undergraduate student to go into social work as a major and career. It is important to understand the motivation and interests of social work students in order to understand the kinds of social workers the schools are producing. A clearer understanding of the self-reported influences for social work students can help educators to design more effective recruitment material and a curriculum that will fit the students' desires and needs. The hope is that this information will help educators develop methods to increase the pool of applicants for the undergraduate and master's program in social work, thereby helping to reduce the shortage of social workers.

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT

## **What Influences Undergraduate Students To Choose Social Work?**

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Brandi E. Williams from the Department of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. Results will be contributed to completion of a thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a junior undergraduate student enrolled at California State University, Long Beach majoring in social work.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the self-reported influences of undergraduate junior students majoring in social work.

### PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will do the following things:

1) Read and sign a consent form and 2) Complete a brief anonymous questionnaire.

### POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is minimal risk involved. If there is any discomfort that you feel in answering the questions in the questionnaire, you are free to refrain from answering them.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

You are not expected to benefit directly from participating. It is hoped potential findings will lead to a better understanding of the self-reported influences of undergraduate students majoring in social work. The results may have implications in helping close the gap in the shortage of social workers.

## PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive a small gift of candy whether or not you complete the questionnaire.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

No names should be written on any questionnaire. All findings will be reported in aggregate numbers. An example, “30% of students reported they like working with children.”

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. Participation or nonparticipation will not affect your grade or any other personal consideration or right you usually expect. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study.

## IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or my thesis advisor Dr. Susan Love at (562) 985-7029.

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as

a research subject, contact the Office of University Research, CSU Long Beach,  
1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90840; telephone: (562) 985-5314 or email to  
research@csulb.edu.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT (AND) OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described  
above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate  
in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Name of Subject

---

Signature of Subject

---

Date

APPENDIX B  
QUESTIONNAIRE

# What Influences Undergraduate Students to Choose Social Work?<sup>1</sup>

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Please circle the answer that best fits your question.

Example: What flavor of ice cream do you prefer?

Vanilla      Chocolate      Strawberry

Circling chocolate indicates that you prefer chocolate over vanilla and strawberry.

**1. Please indicate your sex?**

Male      Female

**2. What is your current age?**

20 or younger      21-26      27-32      33 or older

**3. What is your ethnicity?**

African American/Black      Asian/Pacific Islander      Caucasian/White  
Hispanic/Latino      Native American      Other

**4. Growing up what did you perceive your family economic level to be?**

Poor      Working class      Middle class      Upper class

**5. In the next five years do you see your self working in the field of social work?**

Yes      No      Maybe

**6. Are you thinking of pursuing a masters or doctorate in social work in the future?**

Yes      No      Maybe

**7. As a person in the social work profession how would you like to be identified?**

Social worker      Clinician      Therapist      Caseworker

---

<sup>1</sup>Prepared by Brandi Elaine Williams.

8. What do you like most about the field of social work?

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9. What do you like least about the field of social work?

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10. On a scale of 1-7, rate the following factors by how much they influenced you to major in Social Work? Please circle the number that best fits.

1                    2                    3                    4                    5                    6                    7  
Not influenced                    somewhat influenced                    strongly influenced

*Example: Meeting new people*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Circling number 2 indicates that meeting new people had little influence on your decision to choose Social Work as a major*

Childhood History (Personal)  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Classes do not seem difficult  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Classes seem interesting  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Family and Friends encouragement  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

I like working with people  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

It is a chance to help people  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Negative experiences with those in social work  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Positive experiences with those in social work  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Previous work/volunteer experiences Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

11. On a scale of 1-7, rate the following professional activities by how much it influenced you to major in Social Work? Please circle the number that best fits.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7  
 No influence                      somewhat influenced                      strongly influenced

*Example: Family Therapy*

1 2 3 4 5 6 **7**

*Circling number 7 indicates that the prospect of doing Family Therapy strongly influenced your decision to choose Social Work as a major*

Administration 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Children and Families 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Child Welfare 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Criminal Justice 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Developmental Disabilities 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Employment/Occupational 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Family Services 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Gerontology 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Health Care 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
International SW 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Policy & Planning 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Private Practice (Mental Health) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Public Mental Health 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Public Welfare 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	School Social Work 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Research 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Teaching 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Other (specify) _____ _____

12. On a scale of 1-7, rate the following populations that Social Workers work with by how much it influenced you to major in Social Work? Please circle the number that best fits.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7  
 Not influenced                      somewhat influenced                      strongly influenced

*Example: Homeless*

1 2 3 **4** 5 6 7

*Circling number 4 indicates that working with the Homeless population somewhat influenced you to choose Social Work as a major*

Adults 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Children/adolescents 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Chronically ill 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
-------------------------	---------------------------------------	----------------------------------

Disabled (physically)  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Homeless  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Mental Illness  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Multicultural Clients  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Older Adults  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Poor  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Substance Abusing  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Voluntary Clients  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Other (specify)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Please use the following scale to respond to statements 13 through 19:**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7  
Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree/ nor Disagree                      Strongly Agree

*Example: I like cats*  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Circling number 4 indicates that you neither agree nor disagree that you like cats*

13. **I would like to do counseling or therapy.**  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

14. **I do not feel a need to work in child welfare.**  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

15. **I would like to be involved in community planning.**  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

16. **I do not have any interest in teaching.**  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

17. **In the future, I would like to have a private practice.**  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

18. **I do not want to work as a supervisor.**  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

19. **I would like to run an agency.**  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.*

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